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Two Illinois congressmen on Thursday brought attention to what for many is an unappealing subject -- creeping crud in the Great Lakes.

Near the Shedd Aquarium, with Lake Michigan sparkling in the background, Mark Kirk, a North Shore Republican, and Dan Lipinski, a Chicago Democrat, described their new bill aimed at banning sewage dumping in the Great Lakes.

"We have a problem," Kirk said. "I think this is common-sense legislation."

The Great Lakes Water Protection Act, introduced last week, would quadruple fines from \$25,000 to \$100,000 a day for municipalities dumping raw sewage in the lake.

The bill would establish the Great Lakes Cleanup Fund, which would redirect the penalty money to lake-area states for improved wastewater treatment and habitat restoration programs.

The act would also require cities to be more transparent in their reporting of sewage dumping.

"We need to do this now because we need to set a good example," Kirk said.

More than 24 billion gallons of raw sewage are released into the Great Lakes annually, Kirk said. He explained that the contamination contributes to elevated levels of E. coli bacteria, which causes health problems and leads to beach closures.

Chicago is one city that has taken steps to clean up its act.

Previously, a heavy rainstorm would flood underground pipes, resulting in an overflow of contaminated water that would find its way to Lake Michigan, according to the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago.

Subsequently, Chicago created the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan, a network of 109 miles of tunnels that intercepts the city's sewer system and guides overflow to large storage reservoirs, allowing treatment plants more time to process it.

However, not all Great Lakes communities have instituted similar solutions, the congressmen stressed.

"Other cities have dropped the ball," Kirk said.

He specifically blasted Detroit, which led the pack with 13.2 billion gallons of raw sewage dumped in 2005, according to a report card kept by the Sierra Legal Defense Fund, a Canadian environmental group.

Roughly 40 million people depend on the Great Lakes for their fresh water supply, Kirk said. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Lipinski said, estimates between 1.8 and 2.5 million Americans get sick from drinking polluted water each year.

Lipinski added that 81 percent of Illinois beaches had at least one safety warning due to bacteria, and Kirk said the city loses anywhere from \$8,000 to more than \$35,000 a day when it closes a beach.

"The pretty blue water—it belies the threat that is out there," Lipinski said. "[Dumping] is disgusting, harmful and just plain wrong."

The Great Lakes Water Protection Act would take full effect by 2027, if passed.

The bill has been endorsed by numerous environmental advocacy groups, including the Alliance for the Great Lakes, the National Resources Defense Council, the National Wildlife Federation--and, of course, the Shedd Aquarium.